

TESTIMONY OF

GEORGE A. COLEMAN, ACTING COMMISSIONER OF EDUCATION

ON

RAISED BILLS 930, 6326, 6319, 6325, 6385, 932, 929, 6318

RAISED BILL 930: AN ACT CONCERNING THE SCHOOL ENTRANCE AGE

The State Department of Education (CSDE) supports S.B. No. 930, *AAC The School Entrance Age*, to change the school entrance age requirement, beginning in the school year commencing July 1, 2012, from January first to October first, and to delete the provision allowing parents to withhold enrolling their child in kindergarten until the child is seven years old.

Currently students between the ages of 4 ½ and 7 years old may be enrolled in the same Kindergarten class. Such a wide developmental range makes it challenging to the instructional needs of all children and likely has a negative impact on achievement.

In addition, CT is one of only four states (California, Connecticut, Michigan, Vermont), and the District of Columbia and the Virgin Islands that have cut-off dates between December 1 and January 1. Thirty-five states and Puerto Rico have kindergarten entrance cut-off dates between August 31 and October 16. This bill would result in a policy more consistent with other states.

In order to ensure that the neediest students in our state who would no longer be eligible to enroll in kindergarten under this bill have access to preschool, the CSDE recommends an ongoing additional investment of funding for providing preschool opportunities through an expansion of School Readiness funding to 4-year-olds in the 19 current and former priority school districts.

With that said, CSDE supports S.B. No. 930, with an increase in school readiness funds for those students in priority school districts who are 5 years of age between October 1 and January 1 (approximately 3300 students a year) that will no longer be eligible to enroll in kindergarten.

**RAISED BILL 6326: AN ACT CONCERNING THE RESPONSE OF SCHOOL DISTRICTS
AND THE DEPARTMENTS OF EDUCATION AND CHILDREN AND FAMILIES TO
REPORTS OF CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT**

The State Department of Education (CSDE) strongly supports H.B. No. 6326, *AAC The Response of School Districts and the Departments of Education and Children and Families to Reports of Child Abuse and Neglect*, to improve the sharing of information relating to reports of child abuse and neglect by school employees between the Departments of Children and Families and Education and school districts, with minor technical changes.

The bill codifies the recommendations from a report of the Attorney General and Child Advocate entitled "*Protecting Our Children: Improving Protections for Children When Allegations are Made that*

Education Committee

February 23, 2011

School System Personnel Abused and/or Neglected Children" dated July 8, 2010 concerning investigations of reports of child abuse and neglect in schools.

With that said, while CSDE adamantly supports completing a Child Abuse Registry check for all applicants for certification as outlined in this bill, it can only support this requirement if the Registry check can be completed electronically, as CSDE receives over 30,000 certification applications annually.

In light of the above, CSDE supports H.B. No. 6326 to improve protections for Connecticut's children by improving the information sharing relating to reports of child abuse and neglect by school employees between the Department of Children and Families, CSDE and school districts.

RAISED BILL 6319: AN ACT CONCERNING HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMAS FOR KOREAN WAR VETERANS

The State Department of Education (CSDE) supports H.B. No. 6319, *AAC High School Diplomas for Korean War Veterans*, to allow boards of education to award high school diplomas to veterans of the Korean War who left school early to enlist in the armed forces in service to their country.

Many of the men and women who served in the Korean conflict are approaching or are in their 80's. It would be a fitting tribute of their sacrifice by permitting a local board of education to honor their service with the award of a high school diploma. These individuals postponed a critical period of their educational experience in order to give service to our country. In fact if one were to review their specific training within the military it would correspond with courses allowed for secondary school credit.

Therefore, CSDE supports H.B. No. 6319, *AAC High School Diplomas for Korean War Veterans* because it will provide a deserved acknowledgement of individuals who gave a tremendous sacrifice in the service of their country.

RAISED BILL 6325: AN ACT CONCERNING JUVENILE REENTRY AND EDUCATION

The State Department of Education (CSDE) supports H.B. No. 6325, *AAC Juvenile Reentry and Education*, to require immediate enrollment of students who transfer from Unified School District #1 and Unified School District #2, to amend notification laws regarding student transfers from Unified School District #1 and Unified School District #2, and to amend the time requirements for expelled students seeking to reenter their previous school, with some suggested revisions.

For Section 1(c), CSDE recommends that the section begin with "Notwithstanding any other provisions of the statutes to the contrary..." as CSDE has concerns that schools could reassign these returning students under the provisions of Section 10-233k(a) where it identifies that the district can modify a child's educational plan or placement.

In addition, CSDE supports the concept that children, who have been placed at a detention center, Connecticut Juvenile Training School (CJTS), or a residential placement after having committed an expelled offense, should be allowed to return to public school once they are discharged. CSDE believes the proposed language does not adequately distinguish between the types of placements children are

returning from and the length of time they may be there; and therefore, does not balance between the child's right to return to school after having been out placed for a substantial length of time and the school district's need to be able to maintain safe schools for all students.

CSDE would recommend revisions to Section 3 of the proposed legislation. First, there needs to be a specific timeframe for the child to be in detention, CJTS or a residential placement that would preclude a district from expelling the student upon return from a facility. Second, if districts may expel students after they are discharged from a facility, the quality of the alternative educational program being offered must meet the needs of the student and enhance the student's ability to remain engaged and working towards completing their education. Language which would better define an "alternative educational opportunity" during the period of expulsion and specifically address the needs of students returning from detention, CJTS or a residential placement would promote the student being engaged educationally and reduce the likelihood that the student may commit another offense.

As such, CSDE supports Raised Bill 6325, *AAC Juvenile Reentry and Education*, with some suggested revisions.

RAISED BILL 6385: AN ACT IMPLEMENTING THE BUDGET RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE GOVERNOR CONCERNING EDUCATION

The State Department of Education (CSDE) supports Governor's H.B. No. 6385, *An Act Implementing the Budget Recommendation of the Governor Concerning Education*.

Section 10: Regional Transportation and Uniform School Calendars

CSDE is very excited about engaging the RESC Alliance to study the feasibility of regional school transportation and a uniform school calendar. As established organizations that have promoted regional collaboration for over four decades, the RESC Alliance is the appropriate entity to bring districts and municipalities together to create regional efficiencies and savings.

Districts currently spend nearly \$400 million annually on mandated transportation. This proposal would allow the RESC Alliance to perform the following activities:

- Review existing district transportation contracts to determine and analyze:
 - Bidding practices
 - Costs
 - Contract structures
 - Timelines for renewal
- Examine costs and operational issues with those districts providing transportation directly through in-house operations;
- Examine the opportunity for RESCs to deliver regional services through existing transportation providers; and
- Assess the level of each district's interest to change its current transportation operation.

Like regional transportation, a uniform school calendar is an effort to save money without sacrificing educational quality. Rationales for a uniform calendar include:

- As the state continues to expand school choice options, aligning school calendars would substantially reduce transportation costs for each district.

- As the state seeks to provide increased opportunities for regional transportation, this cannot be fully realized without common vacations, professional days and holidays.
- Under uniform school calendars, districts can collaborate in areas such as professional development, particularly in more specialized certifications such as physics, world languages and ESL/bilingual.

In summary, CSDE fully supports these efforts to reduce state and local costs through regional cooperation and efficiencies.

Section 12: Open Choice

This section gives the Commissioner of Education the authority to increase the per pupil grant amount for districts participating in Open Choice depending upon their level of participation in the program. This proposal is similar but more flexible than what the SDE proposed, which was set grant levels based on tiered levels of participation in the Sheff region only. Our proposal was limited to the Sheff region in the hopes that participation in the program could be significantly increased to help Connecticut achieve the requirements of the Sheff Phase II Stipulated Agreement. The Governor's proposal extends the additional incentive statewide to all participating districts. This is an excellent opportunity for growth in the program statewide which aligns with the State Board of Education's position statement on Public School Choice.

Practically, of the 47 districts that participate in the Choice program, there are currently only 12 districts statewide that exceed a 2% participation level and of those 12 districts, 11 are in the Sheff region. Only 4 districts out of the top 25 participating districts are outside of the Sheff region. Therefore, while the Governor's proposal will allow all participating districts the opportunity to receive additional funding, the majority of any additional funding will be available for dedication to the Sheff remedy.

Section 15: The Minimum Budget Requirement (MBR)

CSDE is grateful that the Governor was able to maintain existing ECS funding levels through the next biennium. We are equally supportive of the proposed MBR legislation that continues to maintain board of education budgets at the 2008-09 level, with no requirement for additional local funding or any reductions to board of education budgets from 2008-09.

Sections Pertaining to the Restructuring of the CT Technical High School System (CTHSS)

Under this bill each Technical High School would be separated from the statewide system and placed under the authority of the local board of education where they are geographically located.

Currently, the CTHSS operates 17 fully-accredited high school diploma granting schools (including J.M. Wright Technical High School that is currently in suspension at this time), 1 Tech Ed center, and 2 Adult Aviation Satellite campuses. The CTHSS mission differs from that of other education agencies in that it requires this unique concept in technical education to position its graduates to advance a skilled workforce capable of meeting CT's workforce development needs. **This mission must be the mainstay for the technical schools of tomorrow as the CTHSS education delivery system and its graduates directly impact the workforce of CT, on a statewide scale.** The following considerations must be given in order to assure continued student success and a high achieving workforce as the present CTHSS structure allows for:

- Unified curriculum delivery and updating resulting in all graduates entering the workforce with advanced skills statewide. *A Statewide Unified School District requires the delivery of a*

consistent, applied integrated trade technology and academic standards-based curriculum. As such the CTHSS is able to deliver statewide trade technology advancements in relevant businesses and industries that correspond to the trade technologies taught in the CTHSS. Trade technology and academic curricula are on a continuous improvement and review cycle to meet the current and projected workforce needs of Connecticut. Our integrated and applied curriculum is a unique and rigorous approach to secondary school education that prepares students for entry into apprenticeship programs, admissions to two-year and four-year colleges, and the immediate productive employment.

- Statewide trade and academic credentialing and college/university preparedness. In accordance with CGS Section 10-95i(b), the State Board of Education must evaluate each trade program in the CTHSS and consider its reauthorization. CTHSS examines Department of Labor reports and projected employment rates to make determinations regarding trade reauthorizations and revising the curriculum to address present technological and job skill changes.
- Fully credentialed/certified trade technology and academic instructors. On February 2nd, 2011, CTHSS received notification of full compliance with CGS Section 10-145 (a). All CTHSS teachers, administrators, and staff members possess an appropriate state certificate in their respective areas.
- High graduation rate percentages. CTHSS continues a long-standing tradition of graduating students that have met both state and national academic and trade standards. Our dropout rate for the Class of 2008 was 2.4% versus the state average of 6.8%.
- Increasing proficiency levels on national testing scores: For the 2010 administration of the CAPT, all subgroups scoring at proficiency and above in math, science, reading, and writing have decreased the gap (with the exception of a light increase in the sub-group gender in reading). All subgroups have decreased the gap in math for students at proficiency and goal levels.
- Narrowing the Achievement Gap. CTHSS is a high performing district that has consistently exhibited a positive trend toward narrowing the achievement gap. The gap between black and white students has decreased across all academic areas at proficiency and goal levels.
- Successful grant procurement and accountability. CTHSS actively seeks competitive grants to support its academic and trade/technology programs.

It is imperative that CTHSS continue to deliver on its mission coupled with continued student success in order for Connecticut to reap the benefits of a high achieving workforce.

RAISED BILL 932: AN ACT CONCERNING THE DEFINITION OF SEVERE NEED SCHOOL FOR PURPOSES OF THE SCHOOL BREAKFAST GRANT PROGRAM

The Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) supports S.B. No. 932 *An Act Concerning the Definition of Severe Need School for Purposes of the School Breakfast Grant* to expand School Breakfast Programs (SBP) in CT and to increase SBP participation; however, as it is written, it may prove problematic in over identification of severe needs schools, determining eligibility for new programs and eliminating otherwise eligible schools due to reporting requirements.

There is strong research available that clearly indicates that a school breakfast positively impacts student achievement. Whether it is due to food insufficiency, busy family schedules, or time constraints, many

February 23, 2011

children come to school without eating breakfast and, as we know, hungry children cannot learn. Therefore, doing everything we can to support SBP expansion is vital to a student's well-being.

While there is no doubt that the intent of the proposed Bill Number 932, *An Act Concerning the Definition of Severe Need School for Purpose of the School Breakfast Grant Program*, would promote SBP expansion, there are some areas of concern which are outlined below:

As noted in the proposed legislation:

"For purposes of this section, "severe need school" means a school in which: (1) the reimbursement rate per meal established by the United States Secretary of Agriculture is insufficient to cover the costs of the school's breakfast program, (2) the school is participating, or is about to participate, in a breakfast program, and (3) twenty per cent or more of the breakfasts served to students at the school in the fiscal year two years prior to the grant year were served free or at a reduced price."

The CSDE has the following concerns and suggestions:

(1) some schools strive to operate efficient, well run SBPs and documenting this factor could penalize the schools that are well operated as well as cause an unnecessary burden on the school district in documenting this information. Additionally, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) effective July 1, 2004 (due to 2004 Reauthorization) no longer requires Local Education Agencies (LEAs) to document that the normal per meal reimbursement is insufficient to cover the costs of the SBP. The CSDE suggestion would be to eliminate this language from the definition of severe need; (2) a minor technical change so that the language reads School Breakfast Program instead of a breakfast program; and

(3) The new proposed language, which is based on "breakfasts served" and not lunches served as regulated in the federal severe need language, could make every existing operating SBP eligible as severe need since there are many more free and reduced price eligible students participating than paying students in the SBP. While CSDE supports the expansion of breakfast programs, the fiscal impact of this language is significant. A more moderate approach of lowering the existing federal definition from 40% lunches served to 20% lunches served could significantly increase the SBP participation without essentially making every operating SBP eligible to receive this grant.

In addition under number #3, if a school had a new or "about to participate" school breakfast program, there would no data available on number of breakfasts served in the two prior years. Therefore determining if they would meet the criteria as "severe need" by this proposed definition would not be possible or would require the school to wait two years until the SBP data was available.

The strength of this proposal suggests that the intent is to encourage many more schools be eligible to participate as severe need based on the fact that more free and reduced price eligible students participate in the SBP than paying students; however, given the current fiscal crisis, the suggestions above to modify the federal definition from 40% of lunches served to 20% lunches served presents a more moderate approach of increasing SBP participation in this state.

**RAISED BILL 929: AN ACT CONCERNING THE QUALIFICATION REQUIREMENTS OF
SCHOOL NURSES**

The State Department of Education (CSDE) supports S.B. No. 929, *An Act Concerning the Qualification Requirements of School Nurses* in the interest of ensuring a high level of expertise by those employed as professional school nurses, with minor revisions.

The current regulations for the qualifications of school nurses requires only one year of experience as a registered nurse within the past five years; 10 hours of continuing education every two years; and licensure as a registered nurse with 12 academic credits, 18 continuing education units or 180 workshop hours.

This bill seeks to direct the State Board of Education to develop and adopt regulations increasing the qualifications of school nurses, by July 1, 2011 (note: this timeline is unrealistic; the CSDE could develop and adopt these new regulations on or before July 1, 2012)

The role and practice of the school nurse has changed significantly over the last decade. Not only have the health needs of the students increased, but research also has shown the ability to learn at school is directly related to status of the student's health. School nurses have a vital role in assisting students achieve academically.

Expectations for preparation of school nurses (registered nurses) have evolved within the context of the larger nursing profession. Today, those who become registered nurses (RNs) attend a hospital program where they receive a diploma, a community college where they receive an associate degree, or a university where they receive a baccalaureate degree. Baccalaureate of Science (BS) Degree programs prepare nurses to function in less structured environments and to intervene and response in situations that are not routine and predictable. The BS nurses' assessment skills are broader than just the technical aspects of nursing care performed by the Associate Degree nurses and these BS registered nurses often have limited supervision available and require the ability to function autonomously. School nurses are in settings with limited supervision, often alone and functioning autonomously; therefore, requiring a baccalaureate degree or an associate degree with additional course work is in line with their role.

Given the level of autonomy in which school nurses practice, it is essential that nurses who enter this specialty are afforded prior nursing experience so that the problem solving skills, assessment skills, leadership and health interventions are safely and appropriately provided and practiced in the school environment. In addition to assure continuing competence in the field upon entry, continuing education is essential. Ongoing continuing education expands and updates knowledge and practice to meet the increasing and ever-changing demands and expectations of the profession and of the education community and is aligned with what is expected of the certified educational staff within schools.

Becoming certified by the National Board of Certification for School Nurses implies a higher level of expertise. Through certification, the school nurse must demonstrate a nationally accepted expert knowledge base for the practice of school nursing. This certification, however, is limited to school nurses with a baccalaureate degree and five years of school nursing experience so not all school nurses upon hire will be eligible to become immediately certified. (Suggested technical change to include "if and when eligible" based on required experience and education necessary to become certified).

Education Committee
February 23, 2011

The CSDE is also sensitive to the fiscal challenges that face Connecticut school districts and the committee should be aware that this bill would increase the cost of education for local school districts. However, quality services that are being provided by school nurses to students and staff should be assured through appropriate education, licensure, and certification. Based on recent survey data, almost half of all Connecticut school nurses already hold a bachelor of science in nursing degree as well as advanced degrees including Master of Science in Nursing or Master of Art in Education. Since this bill will impact future school nurses and more than half already hold a BS or higher degree, the fiscal impact on Connecticut school districts will be incremental as they replace school nurses through attrition.

Again, CSDE strongly supports S.B. No. 929, *An Act Concerning the Qualification Requirements of School Nurses* in the interest of ensuring a high level of expertise by those employed as professional school nurses.

**RAISED BILL 6318: AN ACT CONCERNING DONATIONS OF EQUIPMENT TO THE
REGIONAL VOCATIONAL-TECHNICAL SCHOOL SYSTEM**

The State Department of Education (CSDE) supports H.B. No. 6318, *AAC Donations of Equipment to the Regional Vocational-Technical School System*, to indemnify any person who makes a donation of equipment to the regional vocational-technical school system.

This bill hugely benefits the CT Technical High School System (CTHSS) and any corporate donor seeking to donate to the CTHSS (especially where the items to be donated are larger and of greater dollar value). Pratt and Whitney jet engines and automobile donations are great examples of these types of donations used in CTHSS' programs for instructional purposes only.

There have been issues in the past that have unfortunately prevented CTHSS from accepting these types of donations because as an agency of a sovereign state CSDE was not allowed to indemnify persons who made a donation of equipment to CTHSS. This prevented CTHS students from utilizing the most advanced technologies and equipment to acquire the latest skills needed to prepare them in their trade.

Therefore, CSDE and the CTHSS are in full support of H.B. No. 6318, as the language of this bill may accelerate such donations.